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THE GREEK STRAIN IN OUR OLDEST GOSPELS.

BY GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT.

IF Judaism was the mother of Christianity, Hellenism was an early and influential teacher; or, changing the figure, if we say that the roots of Christianity went down deep into the Hebrew Scriptures, we may say that Hellenism was the air which the young plant inhaled through a thousand pores. But how young was this plant when it began to be modified in fibre and form by its Greek environment? Did Jesus Himself, who lived in what has been called, speaking broadly, a "Hellenized world," owe anything to Greek thought? Did the world of Greek thought affect the first three Gospels, those writings which enshrine the Christian revelation?

To the former of these questions one may reply confidently in the negative. Jesus owed nothing to Greek thought. His message came out of His own spiritual experience. It was, doubtless, conditioned by the Old Testament, but that was not its source. His own religious life—something greater, completer, more divine than the Old Testament—was the living spring of His word.

But when we turn from the teaching of Jesus to its synoptic setting the case is different. Of this setting we cannot say that it owes nothing to Greek thought. And when we consider how the synoptic Gospels arose, we naturally expect to discover in them a Greek element. When we reflect that Luke was a Greek-speaking Gentile if not himself of Greek blood, that the author of our first Gospel was probably a Greek-speaking Gentile, and that in the period when the synoptic Gospels assumed their present form the Christian community was predominantly Greek in its language and civilization, we recognize the inevitableness of a Greek strain in their rendering of the Gospel story.

To follow this Hellenic strain through the entire narrative would be impossible within the limits of a brief article. We shall accordingly consider a single point, but one of great interest and importance, especially at the present time, namely, the story of the supernatural birth of Jesus.

This story of the birth of Jesus from a virgin lies on the surface of the New Testament somewhat as the great granite boulders lie on the New England hillsides. They are supposed to have been brought thither in the Ice Age; certainly their original home was elsewhere. So with the story in question. It is not an integral and vital part of the Christian religion as this is set forth in the New Testament. It does not play a part in the historical work of Jesus any more than the reputed miraculous birth of Alexander did in his conquest of the world.

For consider these facts. John Mark, citizen of Jerusalem, intimately associated with the Christian movement from the first, who in his Gospel lays great emphasis on the supernatural element in the career of Jesus, and who wrote for Gentile readers to whom any information about the birth of Him whom they had taken as their Saviour must have been welcome, especially any information so astounding in character as the story of a supernatural conception, says nothing of the origin of Jesus. Moreover, his narrative seems, in an indirect manner, to exclude the miraculous conception. For it tells how Mary went forth from Nazareth, with some of her family, in order to take Jesus by force and bring Him back to His home (Mark 3: 21, 31). This was in the early springtime of the Galilean ministry, when the preaching of Jesus and the cures wrought by Him were exciting wide-spread interest. Now we could believe that the brothers of Jesus, being ignorant of what had transpired at His birth, would not have shrunk from a violent interference with His work, had that work seemed to them likely to lead to political complications or otherwise to endanger or embarrass His family; but that Mary herself, after the marvellous experiences, which by Luke and Matthew she is said to have had, could have gone to such lengths, seems incredible. We may say, then, that according to this oldest Gospel Mary herself is an indirect witness against the story of a supernatural birth of Jesus.

Again, Peter and Paul bear us out in the statement that the story of the supernatural birth of Jesus is not an integral and

vital part of the Christian religion. If that story was vouched for by any one in the first Christian generation who was qualified to speak, then Peter, one of the "pillars" of the Mother Church at Jerusalem, would have been likely to know of it. But neither in his Letter nor in the words which are attributed to him in Acts is there any trace of an acquaintance with the story recorded in Matthew and Luke. Paul, too, is silent in regard to it. Yet he was acquainted with the Jerusalem church. Near the beginning of his Christian career he had spent two weeks with Peter, and among his co-laborers were Barnabas and Silas, distinguished members of the Mother Church, who doubtless knew all that was known there regarding the life of Jesus. And Paul was not only in a position to know the facts regarding the birth of Jesus, but he was also of a speculative mind that would probably have led him to make some use of the story of a supernatural birth of Jesus had such a story existed and been in good standing in his time.

Finally, we have a right to say that the story of a supernatural birth of Jesus is not an integral and vital part of the Christian religion because Jesus Himself was silent in regard to His birth. It is reasonable to believe that He knew all that was to be known on the subject. It is also reasonable to believe that He would have told His disciples if there had been anything regarding His parentage and birth that was of peculiar importance for their understanding of Him. If He was aware that His birth had been absolutely unique, if, to use the language of the Creed, He was aware that He had been "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary," then His silence is unintelligible. For here He was concerned not with something incidental to His person, but with a vital and far-reaching reality. The silence of Jesus on this matter is of more weight, or ought to be, than any amount of speech from others. In the presence of this single fact, were there no confirmatory grounds, the Christian disciple is amply justified in saying that the story of the supernatural birth of Jesus is not an integral part of the religion of the New Testament.

We are now ready to ask whence this story came. It is scarcely necessary to-day to show that it is wholly un-Jewish. It is well known that the Old Testament never contemplates a future deliverer who is other than a true, normal man. The thought of a Messiah who should be physically descended from God is alto-

gether foreign to it. The appeal Isaiah 7: 14, made first in Matthew and which has been re-echoed to the present hour, is not an appeal to the original text, but to an incorrect Greek translation. The "young woman" of the Hebrew original became a "virgin" in the Greek rendering, and this seemed to furnish excellent Scripture authority for the view represented in our first and third Gospels. But this was a delusion. The great prophet was made responsible for a teaching which neither he nor any Old Testament writer ever entertained.

This teaching is likewise foreign to Jewish writings of the period between the Old Testament and the coming of Christ. The *Similitudes* of Enoch speak of a heavenly Messiah, but there is no trace of the idea that this heavenly Being was to come into organic relation to mankind.

We shall not dwell, then, on the point that the affinities of the story of the supernatural birth of Jesus are not Jewish. It is true that the story, especially as given by Luke, has a Jewish color. It speaks of Gabriel, of the throne of David, the house of Jacob and other details that are Jewish; but this color may have been given by a Gentile believer as well as by a Jew. Moreover, it is merely *color*; it does not touch the essence of the story.

We proceed at once to indicate why this story of the birth of Jesus ought to be regarded as of Greek origin. It is not meant that the Greeks were the only people who conceived of distinguished men as sprung from human mothers and divine fathers, but only that, as regards the origin of our story, we need not look beyond the Greek environment. This environment was saturated with the thought that great personalities were the offspring of gods. Such were the mighty figures of prehistoric times, Hercules and Æsculapius, Hermes and Dionysus. Such also were the distinguished characters of history in ever-increasing numbers. From the fifth century before Christ onward into our era the belief in physical descent from a god and an earthly mother pervaded all classes of society. Speusippus, nephew and successor of Plato as head of the Academy, believed that the great philosopher was born of a virgin, and this came to be an accepted view. Philo of Alexandria was so deeply influenced by the Greek philosophy that he ascribed the paternity of Isaac directly to God. Justin Martyr, who was born not long after the composition of our synoptic Gospels and in whom we can see how an educated

Greek looked at the doctrine of the supernatural birth of Jesus, said in his Apology, addressed to Antoninus Pius: "When we say that the Word, who is the first birth of God, was produced without sexual union, and that He, Jesus Christ our teacher, was crucified and died and rose again and ascended into heaven, we propound nothing different from what you believe regarding those whom you esteem sons of Jupiter." And again he says: "If we affirm that He was born of a virgin, accept this in common with what you accept of Perseus."

It will not be transcending the Greek environment of the early church if we draw an illustration from Roman history, for in this point of descent from the gods as in a thousand others the Romans borrowed from the Greeks. Suetonius in his history of Augustus does not hesitate to ascribe to Apollo the paternity of the great Emperor, and Vergil, a century earlier, in the Sixth Book of his *Æneid*, speaks of Augustus as *divi genus*.

These illustrations are sufficient to show that the doctrine of the physical descent of great men from gods had long been an article in the creed of the Greek world. Whether we think with Justin that the Greeks and Romans were led to this belief by "wicked devils," or regard it, somewhat more charitably, as a sincere religious attempt to account for the mystery of extraordinary personalities, the fact itself remains.

Now when one reflects that the Christian Church after the destruction of Jerusalem was very largely, perhaps we might say *essentially*, a church made up of Greek-speaking people, when also one reflects that this conception of physical descent from gods in the case of great men was as characteristic of the Greeks as the thought of evolution is of the present generation, and when, finally, one considers that the earliest Gospel left the origin and childhood of Jesus a blank and so an open field for speculation, it cannot appear strange that Gentile converts claimed a miraculous birth for that teacher and wonder-worker whose wisdom and might far transcended those of all other great men. From the Greek point of view this result was almost inevitable.

To sum up now in a word, we may say that the story of the supernatural birth of Jesus, which is a loose and alien element in the New Testament, is essentially Greek. Its Jewish color pertains only to the literary form.

They who originated the story, or stories, of the birth of Jesus

—for the discrepant narratives of Matthew and Luke may go back to independent sources—doubtless believed that they were speaking what was essentially true. The miraculous conception was for them a natural, if not necessary, inference from the stupendous results of the teaching of Jesus. A man whose name had penetrated the entire Empire of Rome in less than a century and had called into existence almost countless societies of disciples must have sprung directly from God. Hence it is not likely that it occurred to them to search for contemporary evidence of the truth of their narrative. Moreover, they did not live in an age that was given to investigating the historical grounds of its beliefs. This particular article of belief was simply a part of the Greek heritage, and in the thought of Greek Christians it needed no other support than that which any one could find in abundance in the victories which were daily being achieved in the name of Jesus.

And the originators of the story not only believed it to be essentially true to fact, they also, beyond question, felt that this story rendered to Jesus a just meed of praise. Wide circles must have shared this feeling, for not otherwise could we explain how the story came to be incorporated in the narratives of Matthew and Luke.

But in this whole matter of the miraculous conception of Jesus the modern view differs from that of the early Greek Christians. We do not seek to account for great personalities, even for the greatest known among men, in the way they did. To us God appears as a God of order, who invariably honors His own laws and institutions. Doubtless the personality of Jesus still has its profound mystery, but this is not illuminated for us by the Greek solution. That only begets new mysteries. Finally, it cannot be said of the age that is beginning to reject the Greek story of the miraculous conception of Jesus that it is less concerned to honor Him than were those unknown believers who first gave currency to that story. No age has ever given to Jesus more intelligent and sincere honor than is being rendered by the present. But our world is widely different from that of the first century, and some things which seemed natural then are for us irrational and impossible.

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